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ABSTRACT

The purpose of this digest is to help educators develop a curriculum for multiracial students that fosters their ability to develop a positive identity and achieve academically. To this end, the digest briefly reviews identity formation in multiracial children and then presents schoolwide and classroom strategies that have been shown to be particularly effective with multiracial students and that also promote all children's understanding of racial issues. Multiracial identity development is a complex process that is only now being defined, as researchers have determined that models of minority identity development are not appropriate for multiracial individuals and that models based on deficits in development seriously shortchange multiracial individuals. A model recently developed by W. Poston (1990) provides a typology of stages through which some families progress as they help their children define themselves personally and develop connections to their heritages. It is important for schools to foster universal respect for students. The message that educators convey about how they view multicultural families is important to the developing self-concept of children, but how best to serve these students educationally is an area of professional development still being defined. Educators should consider their own views about multiracial students, and they should elicit information from multiracial families so that they can communicate more effectively and sensitively with their students. Teachers can facilitate age-appropriate discussions about racial issues and can plan curricula and activities to support the identity formation of their multiracial students. School counselors can also use sensitive approaches to help educators by affirming

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the right of all students to be treated on an individual basis. Educators can foster the best in all students by helping them appreciate the uniqueness of each individual. (Contains 16 references.) (SLD)

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THE SCHOOLING OF MULTIRACIAL STUDENTS

The number of multiracial children in the U.S. is increasing: more than 100,000 have born annually over the last decade, and most interracial families reside in urban areas (Okun, 1996; U.S. Bureau of the Census, cited in Root, 1996). Therefore, it is necessary for educators and counselors to understand and meet the special needs of students of mixed heritage and to support their families' efforts to nurture them.

Children of mixed racial and ethnic heritage have unique advantages. They also experience particular challenges. Individuals who are socialized as multiracial frequently have an enhanced sense of self and identity, and greater intergroup tolerance, language facility, appreciation of minority group cultures, and ties to single-heritage groups than do monoracial people (Thornton, 1996).

On the other hand, developing a positive identity may be more difficult for multiracial children than for others, the result of a combination of personal feelings about their identity choices, the way they are socialized within their family, and the attitudes and pressures they encounter when they begin to function in society (Morrissey, 1996). Further, the racism visited upon people of color generally in the U.S. may be exacerbated by a corollary, and possibly even stronger, prejudice of some people against mixing races through marriage and procreation (Miller & Rotheram-Borus, 1994; Pinderhughes, 1995) and "blurring the physical categories upon which white status and power depend" (Wilson, 1987, p. 7). While black-white marriages comprise the lowest rate of intermarriage, the families they create elicit the strongest negative reactions (Okun, 1996), possibly because they are more noticeable than other interracial families or because racism against African Americans has historically been stronger than racism against other groups.

To help educators develop a curriculum for multiracial students that fosters their ability to develop a positive identity and achieve academically, establish a supportive environment for them, and promote an overall understanding of multiracialism, this digest briefly reviews identity formation in multiracial children. It also presents schoolwide and classroom strategies that have been shown to be particularly effective with multiracial students and that also promote all children's understanding of racial issues.

The Multiracial Population

Ethnic group differences have a significant impact on children's social development, although the impact varies with age and specific ethnicity. How multiracial children are labeled by themselves, their families, and society in general, is an important factor in their lives, for labels are powerful comments on how an individual's existence is viewed.

The term "multiracial" is now favored to designate an individual's mixed heritage. It covers people not only of mixed race, but monoracial people of mixed ethnicity, language, and culture. Further, monoracial children who were adopted by parents of a different race often consider themselves multiracial as their lives incorporate the cultures of both their biological and adoptive parents. "Multiracial" is used here to indicate individuals of mixed racial, ethnic, or cultural ancestry whose lives reflect multiple heritages. It should be noted, though, that great variations exist among members of the multicultural population, both in the way they perceive themselves and in the way they are treated by society, despite the common classification.

Stages of Identity Development

Multiracial identity development is a complex process that is only now being defined as researchers have determined that models of minority identity development are not appropriate for multiracial individuals and that models based on deficits in development seriously shortchange multiracial individuals. One recently-created model of racial identity development meshes existing research on personal identity (which includes constructs such as self-esteem, self-worth, and interpersonal competence) and reference group orientation (constructs such as racial identity, racial esteem, and racial ideology) to define stages of development reflecting the impact of heritage. The stages range from an individual's initial acquisition of a personal identity (which does not encompass racial factors) to satisfaction with his or her ultimate decision about group identification after working through various conflicts related to the need to make such a choice. The model's last stage is integration of all the components of an individual's heritage (Poston, 1990). This model provides a typology of the stages that some families progress through as they help their children define themselves personally and develop connections to their heritages. However, the model does not fit the children of multiracial families choosing to embrace only one culture.

Attitudes Towards Classification

Within the multiracial community there are several alternative views on classification. Some people want to be classified solely as human, asserting that any designation other than "white" relegates them to a lower status, given existing racism (Pinderhughes, 1995). Other families, perhaps the majority, help their children develop a multiracial identity that promotes equal pride in all the components of their heritage (Pinderhughes, 1995). Still others—single parents, especially, who opt to emphasize their own race—foster a monoracial identity for their children. Some do so because the children most closely resemble members of a certain race; others do so because they are knowledgeable about only one of their children's heritages (Mills, 1994). In particular, some parents of children with African ancestry raise them as black in order to prepare them for their treatment (including victimization by racism) as such (Morrison & Rodgers, 1996).

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School Practices

Multiracial children need to be exposed to models of all the ethnicities they comprise and to multiracial models. They also need to live and learn in a supportive community that affirms multiracialism, to understand what it means to be multiracial, and to acquire culturally-linked coping skills.

The existence of multiracial children challenges prevailing assumptions about natural divisions between people, and assignment of traits based on race. Optimally, in school, these children "will serve as creative resources for developing new forms of polyglot cultural creativity" (Chiong, 1998. p. 109). This is not to say that they should be treated as one more race to be identified, assigned specific personal traits and learning expectations, and segregated. Rather, multicultural children, with their particular contributions to discourse in the classroom, should encourage educators to consider the needs and strengths of individuals rather than groups, and to reject all race-based stereotypes (Glass & Wallace, 1996). The presence of multiracial children can enhance all children's understanding of racial differences, demonstrating that people of all ethnicities have more commonalities than differences, and that differences among individuals and groups, including those represented by diverse family configurations, are normal.

It is important for schools to foster universal respect for students, to be clear that intolerance by either staff or students is not acceptable, and to provide their staffs with accurate information on multiculturalism so they can correct misconceptions when they hear them from other adults or children (Morrison & Rodgers, 1996). School people need to be vigilant to ensure that no children are victimized by others, however subtly, and that the identity chosen by students is accepted and respected by their peers. Finally, they need to be sensitive to the facts that racism can be manifested differently according to the targeted group and that different groups and individuals perceive and respond to racism differently.

The Role of Educators

The message that educators convey about how they view multicultural families is important to the developing self-concept of children, but how best to serve multiracial students educationally is an area of professional development still being defined. As the trend toward distinguishing between members of different ethnic groups and between members of the same ethnic group continues, in recognition of the fact that "lumping" is neither appropriate nor useful, interest in better meeting the specific needs of multiracial students is increasing. The traditional "deficit model" for these students, which led educators to assume that they were rife with problems in need of solving, is slowly giving way to the belief that the needs of multiracial students are neither different from those of other students, nor more severe. Further, since multiracial children may identify themselves in many different ways, it is important for educators to reflect and respect the preferences of individual children when alluding to their heritage. Key to the education of multiracial children, just like all other children, is enabling them to feel included in both the process and content of education.

Considering Personal Views on Race and Multiracialism. In order to develop empathy for multiracial children in general, educators should understand how people from other cultures view their world; to do so for a specific multiracial child, they should learn how that child views the world. Further, educators need to examine their personal values with regard to interracial marriage and families, and consider whether society's historical court-supported disapproval of race mixing has influenced them. They should ask themselves if they automatically categorize a multiracial child as a member of a generic or specific minority group, and if doing so shortchanges the student in terms of respect and expectations.

Educators need to identify the unique characteristics of each child, instead of assuming that all children who share a heritage share the same complement of characteristics. Learning about different ethnicities will help educators understand that there are vast differences within groups, including physical, religious, economic, political, and educational. There are also differences in the appearance of members of the same ethnic group as well as similarities in appearance across groups, so it is not useful to assume a child's ethnicity can be determined by physical characteristics. It is important, too, for educators to recognize that cultural factors, in both historical and current contexts, influence children's development and can serve to explain certain attitudes and behavior (Wardle, 1989).

Eliciting Information from Multiracial Families. It is important for educators to know about the heritage, in all of its possible complexity, of their students. Such information can further help teachers transcend any negative attitudes about multiracialism they may have absorbed from living in a largely race-based society (Glass & Wallace, 1996). Parent-teacher conferences, preferably held at the start of a child's schooling, can be a forum for learning about students' backgrounds. To alleviate any discomfort with questions about ethnic background, educators can employ a questionnaire created by the anti-bias task force of the National Association for the Education of Young Children which facilitates supportive querying (cited in Morrison & Rodgers, 1996). In particular, parents can be asked about how they identify their children, and how the children see themselves, so educators can use the appropriate term and respect the family's attitude toward classification (Morrison & Rodgers, 1996). Parents can also be asked what they consider their cultural and ethnic heritage to be, how they support it at home (i.e., rituals and celebrations), and how they would like to see it supported in school. Finally, parents should be consulted about how they tell their children to handle derogatory comments (Wardle, 1987).

This information helps educators more effectively and sensitively communicate with their students. Knowing a child's heritage will prevent educators from making wrong assumptions based on the child's appearance or on the appearance of only one parent. It will also enable them to encourage multiracial children to show pride in all their ethnicities. In addition, teachers should know in advance that some children, when doing a project on their heritage, will quite correctly present material on several cultures.

Meeting the Developmental Needs of Multiracial Students. How well multiracial children form a cohesive identity within a society that favors racial purity is largely determined by family and community support which enables them to reflect and take pride in all their heritages (Chiong, 1998). Thus, it is important for educators to support and accept them; to help children develop the skills and confidence to protect themselves from verbal and physical abuse; and to explore with the children who abuse the reasons why they do so, and to make it clear that such behavior cannot be tolerated in school (Wardle, 1987, 1992). They can

also help students feel a sense of community, especially important if their parents' interracial marriage, or their own interracial adoption, has caused rifts in their extended family (Miller & Rotheram-Borus, 1994).

School Activities and Curriculum

All aspects of school life can support multiracial children and counter racism that children of all ethnicities see in society at large. In general, teachers can facilitate age-appropriate discussions and foster open and supportive questioning about race. It is natural for young children to ask questions like "Are you black?", and teachers need to be ready to help children respond in a way that builds their self-concept and educates the questioner (Morrison & Rodgers, 1996; Wardle, 1992).

One educational and engaging project, which can be schoolwide or involve only a single class, is developing and sharing family trees. Students can go back as far as possible to develop their own tree, questioning their families, and seeking out illustrative artifacts. Teachers can help adopted students research aspects of their heritage not shared by their current family. Parents or other relatives can be invited to talk to the class or participate in a group activity (Wardle, 1987).

In addition, schools can do the following (Morrison & Rodgers, 1996; Wardle, 1987, 1992):

- Celebrate many heritages, stressing their interplay in life and the ways that different cultures have similar commemorations.
- Provide toys for younger children which include dolls with multiracial characteristics.
- Include multiracial persons as role models when selecting assembly speakers and other resource persons.
- Seek out and use the increasing number of children's books available that depict multiracialism in the classroom, acquire them for the school library, and request that the local library purchase them for family use.

Curriculum can include study units on art, music, and literature, which transcend ethnic boundaries, instead of units on specific groups, such as "Indians" (Wardle, 1987). Curriculum can diminish differences between cultures by refraining from breaking groups into specific categories defined by color and physical attributes. Specifically, at the appropriate grade level, curriculum can do the following (Morrison & Rodgers, 1996; Wardle, 1996):

- Present information on, and show pictures of, people of many racial and ethnic groups, including those of mixed heritage.
- Demonstrate how people in the U.S. have successfully mixed languages, cultures, and religions throughout its history, and how the country has always been a home to multiethnic people (for example, early settlers whose parents comprised different European heritages).
- Identify multiracial heroes such as Frederick Douglass and James Audubon, and cultural figures like Maria Tallchief and Paula Abdul.
- Cover the current status of multiracial people around the world, such as Mestizos, Creoles, and Brazilians.
- Address directly the history of racism against groups of people, including the multiracial population, and discuss the reasons for it.
- Study monoracial groups to promote an understanding of the role of race in society by exploring why some people need to belong to an exclusive group or need to feel superior to others, and what the societal and personal consequences of such attitudes are.
- Research how social systems have institutionalized prejudice, segregation, and discrimination, and how such policies have negatively affected both society at large and individuals of all races.

Counseling

School counselors need to provide an accurate assessment and intervention for students of color, and to understand how historical and current racism impacts the lives of individuals of all ethnicities (Okun, 1996). With regard to multiracial children, counselors should help them develop a positive racial identity, possibly in the face of challenges imposed by monoracial groups that resist acceptance of blending (Morrissey, 1996).

To provide services most usefully, counselors must reconsider race-based preconceptions resulting from erroneous assumptions. Traditionally, for example, it has been thought that multiracial children have problems, identity conflicts in particular, because they "must choose" a race (Wilson, 1987, p. 7). It has also been believed that the problems they do have, which seem to have no bearing on their racial composition, are nevertheless race-related. Both these beliefs can result in overlooking the real causes of a student's problems and, thus, can sharply limit the benefits of the counseling. Conversely, exploration of clients' attitudes about their identity and heritage can reveal that a problem (such as depression or family difficulties), which on the surface is not race-related, actually is (Adler, 1987).

Multiracial teenage clients may need special supports. While all adolescents experience conflicts in identity development, those of multiracial youth may be exacerbated by a desire to find a dating partner who matches, or simply respects, their heritage; or by their peer groups' newly-manifested ostracism, resulting from a heightened emphasis on conformity. To work effectively with adolescents, counselors need to be aware of their own attitudes toward interracial mixing and the way that personal negative feelings can interfere with their efforts to help clients accept themselves and assimilate into society (Morrissey, 1996)

To best work with young multiracial clients, counselors should do the following (Adler, 1987; Poston, 1990; Morrissey, 1996; Okun, 1996):

- Understand the racial identity development process.
- Develop counseling processes and goals that are consistent with the individual differences and cultural orientations of their clients.
- Create a culturally sensitive counseling climate, and demonstrate respect and compassion for clients and validation of their multiple heritages.
- Learn about each client's heritage, and when appropriate, participate in local ethnic events, alone or with clients.

- Learn about the cultural and experiential differences of each client within a sociopolitical context.
- Help clients explore issues related to differences between the counselor's and client's heritage, and help clients feel confident that those differences will not compromise the effectiveness of the counseling process.
- Encourage clients to discuss personal feelings about identity and ethnic affiliation, since many families do not emphasize issues of heritage, despite recent increased public attention to multiracial pride. Create a safe atmosphere where clients can express feelings of alienation and anger.
- Help clients understand that they may have internalized the biased attitudes of others about their heritage, and help them move from an external to an internal perspective of self.
- Consider the effects on clients of family and personal stresses related to race-related conflicts and racism.
- Offer to work with families to help them fully accept their multiracial children, enable them to foster their children's positive racial identity development, and promote their children's interest in exploring all their heritages.
- Learn about available community resources and support groups for clients and their families.

Conclusion

Educators can help multiracial students develop a positive self-concept and racial identity, and succeed in school, by affirming their right to be treated on an individual basis and in the same way as monoracial students. They can help monoracial students develop an appreciation of an individual's multiracialism. They can help all students by infusing the curriculum with positive images of multiracial individuals and families to indicate that multiracialism is normal and even commonplace, and that throughout history multiracial people have made substantial contributions to all areas of life. Educators can foster the best in all children by helping them appreciate the uniqueness of each individual and by supporting their efforts to overcome racism and to make race and racial differences insignificant (Glass & Wallace, 1996).

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A companion digest, ***The Identity Development of Multiracial Children,*** covers various issues related to the ways multiracial children and their families view themselves and are viewed by society.

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